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President:	Mrs. Haley	(United States of America)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Zhang Dianbin
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Ms. Guadey
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Sadykov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Iliichev
	Senegal	Mr. Ciss
	Sweden	Mr. Skau
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	Uruguay	Mr. Bermúdez

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/339)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/339)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. O'Brien is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/339, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: On 15 April, the exhausted, oppressed people of Syria suffered yet another horrendous attack. Scared and starved, men, women and children from the towns of Fo'ah and Kefraya were targeted by a car bomb while stuck at a checkpoint in Rashidin. There were 67 children among the 125 dead — such a terrible price for those already robbed of so much.

Yet I do not raise the incident solely because of the loss of life or depravity of the attackers. Rather, it was the unity of the humanitarian response to the attack that ought also to be in the headlines. Humanitarians from all directions rushed in to save lives. Syrian Arab Red Crescent workers, first responders, medical staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some 15 Syrian NGOs, along with countless civilians, bound together to aid survivors as best they could. Out of a deplorable terrorist act arose a testament to the strength of the Syrian spirit — of ordinary civilian Syrians coming together to help others, regardless of their background.

All too sadly, such glimmers of humanity, acts that we see everyday at a local level across Syria, are overshadowed by the sheer number and ferocity of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools and markets. The past months have seen fighting continue to intensify on numerous fronts. The Secretary-General has said time and again that there will be no military end to this conflict. Yet, military might continues to be used against civilians in a way that defies all reason, let alone morality or law. The use of abhorrent chemical weapons on 4 April in Khan Shaykhun was yet another horrific account of such brutality. I wish I could say it was mindless brutality — but no, it was deliberate, planned, predetermined by other humans against their own fellow human beings, sheer unbridled cruelty by leaders and commanders and we await the investigation to confirm which ones.

Just a few days ago, two more hospitals were rendered inoperable after reported air strikes that also led to the deaths and injury of civilians, including children. At least six hospitals and three schools have reportedly been impacted in April alone. I echo the call of our humanitarian coordinators that attacks against medical facilities are completely unacceptable and must stop. What purpose can the use of such military tactics bring? Certainly, they do not bring peace or any benefit to any Syrian. These gross tactics will cause only further human suffering, human suffering borne primarily by the civilian population — and for which perpetrators must, and on this we are determined, be held to account — if not now, in the nearest future possible.

Beyond these attacks that have so shocked the world, as I said to the Council last month (see S/PV.7909), I am also gravely concerned about the situation in besieged eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, where civilians remain trapped amid reports of relentless shelling, air strikes and ground fighting. The last informal access routes have reportedly been closed, further restricting movement for some 400,000 people who live in the area, and whom the United Nations has been unable to access since October last year. Increased fighting has also resulted in displacement in northern Hama, where some 20,000 people have been displaced in recent days. In Idlib, air strikes and shelling continue to kill civilians and damage civilian infrastructure. Just this week, a medical facility in Shinan village was reportedly struck by air strikes, and in Khan Shaykhun, where the chemical attack occurred earlier in the

month, its market was taken out by aerial bombardment that resulted in the deaths of seven civilians, including a child, and the wounding of 30 more.

In Raqqa, ongoing fighting has also led to deaths, injury and displacement. Some 39,000 newly displaced people fled fighting to join the tens of thousands already in camps outside Raqqa city, and more arrive every day. The situation for those in the camps is extremely difficult, with four out of five people lacking appropriate shelter, and there are now reports of the deaths of several children due to a lack of medical care. The United Nations and our NGO partners are responding from Qamishli, and there are plans to scale up the response in the coming days.

While insecurity causes the humanitarian situation to deteriorate for hundreds of thousands, access to provide them with life-saving support is challenged at every turn. I am concerned by the rise — I repeat rise — in administrative and other bureaucratic restrictions imposed by all parties. For example, in the north-east of Syria, requirements for humanitarians to register with local authorities have been in place since March; these include provisions regarding NGO recruitment policies and interference with procurement processes, among others. Furthermore, since 4 April local authorities have attempted to direct where assistance could be delivered. Such directing of assistance is contrary to the humanitarian principles. These wrongful attempted coercions have resulted in a pause in United Nations operations in Hasakah governorate, affecting nearly 100,000 people. In Idlib, similar restrictions — such as new registration demands and requests for information on and interference in the staffing, logistics and finances of NGOs — only penalize those most in need.

I will not repeat again the bureaucratic delaying tactics used by the Government of Syria to thwart humanitarian assistance at every turn, beyond saying that they continue to bring untold human suffering. As a result of these tactics and the ongoing insecurity, levels of access for inter-agency cross-line convoys are no greater than they were at this time last year. Only four convoys have deployed so far under the new two-monthly April-May plan, reaching 157,500 people. None of those convoys reached besieged areas due to a lack of necessary authorizations. In fact, the only besieged people reached this year by land were the 6,000 trapped in Khan al-Shih and the 60,000 in the four towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Fo'ah and Kefraya, who were accessed separately through the objectionable, tit-for-tat four towns agreement. Deir ez-Zor, besieged by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, continues to be reached by airdrops. I have said publicly that the failure to deliver is a stain on not just the parties to the conflict, but also on those in the international community, including the Security Council, as well as the members of the humanitarian task force of the International Syria Support Group, who have committed themselves to exercising their influence to improve humanitarian access, particularly to besieged areas.

Despite this challenge, the United Nations and humanitarian partners continue to relentlessly negotiate access, as we have always done and wherever it is possible. Real progress is needed now to stymie the tide of death and suffering inflicted on people day after day, month after month. For many, it is already too late. Inaction has played a part in material changes to the humanitarian landscape. As the noose has tightened around eastern Ghouta, some 30,000 people in the adjacent areas of Barza and Qabun have also come under siege by the Government of Syria.

Significantly, however, we continue to see an overall reduction in the number of people besieged due to the starve-and-surrender tactics used primarily by the Government of Syria. Among others, thousands of people in Wadi Barada, Khan al-Shih, Al-Waer in Homs city, and in the four towns referred to earlier have now been displaced as part of local agreements, which followed years of besiegement and intense air strikes, shelling and sniping. Khan al-Shih and Zabadani have now been removed from the list of besieged locations. In fact, Zabadani is now devoid of its civilian population. As a result of these changes, the number of people in besieged areas now stands at just over 620,000.

Although the overall number of those besieged is falling, this process of evacuation must not be misconstrued as a positive development. These evacuations are not in line with humanitarian principles and are not conducted in consultation with the people. Let us not pretend that those who evacuate move to a location of safety. Many of those who displace to Idlib or northern Aleppo continue to live in areas where civilian structures, including hospitals, come under regular aerial bombardment, and their access to basic goods such as food and shelter is limited. These civilians may no longer be besieged, but they have been forced to leave their homes and they continue to suffer.

Given the shifting front lines, all routes need to remain open to allow people safe passage and for aid to reach people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes via the brave humanitarian aid workers. We have seen innovations of necessity successfully implemented through air drops to Deir ez-Zor and the air bridge to Qamishli. Now, with needs increasing in north-east Syria and more traditional routes inaccessible, an increasing number of United Nations partners are looking for alternatives. The number of international NGOs operating out of north-east Syria has nearly quadrupled in the past year and is expected to grow further as needs continue to outstrip the assistance being provided. A land route from Aleppo to Qamishli to provide support to Raqqa is also being negotiated and explored.

I am sad to say that the humanitarian situation is deteriorating, if that were possible, and the need for the active engagement of members of the Council is urgent. The core needs of the Syrian people from the international community in general, and from those Member States seated in the Council in particular, remain largely unchanged. They include a consolidation of the nationwide ceasefire, and in particular a pause in fighting in eastern Ghouta, to enable the delivery of aid; the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all parties to the conflict; and the lifting of arbitrary and bureaucratic impediments by all parties throughout Syria.

It is imperative that no country or group prevent people from moving in safety or humanitarian organizations from accessing people in need wherever they are in Syria. A step change in access to besieged and hard-to-reach locations is needed in order to ensure full implementation of United Nations inter-agency convoy plans, and to ensure delivery on the basis of humanitarian needs assessments. There must also be an end to the removal of medical items from convoys, and immediate, unimpeded and sustained access to all in need throughout Syria. In particular, there must be an immediate lifting of all sieges.

Finally, there must be a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). As long as military tactics are prioritized over political, there can be no lasting peace, and it will be the civilian population that is exposed to further needless suffering as a result. I also wish to say that we need action now, because now it is already too late for the more than 250,000 Syrians who have died over the course of this atrocious war. I would therefore tell the members of the Security Council that it is action today that is going to count.

The President: I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing and tell him how much we appreciate his reporting. I think it is very insightful and will certainly help us going forward.

I shall now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Bessho (Japan): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

We have heard many times that the situation in Syria cannot get any worse, yet this tragic crisis continues. Thirteen and a half million people need humanitarian assistance. Even the so-called improved access in March allowed aid convoys to reach only 39 per cent of people for whom access was requested. There has been some progress on the hard-to-reach areas since the 12 February agreement between the Syrian Higher Relief Committee and the United Nations, but the situation in the besieged areas is still devastating. And we can only imagine the horror of the evacuees on 15 April who finally exited their besieged towns only for their convoy to be brutally targeted in Al-Rashidin.

The many victims of the tragedy in Syria include not only ordinary civilians, but also the people who are trying to help them. Nearly one year has passed since the adoption of resolution 2286 (2016), which called for the protection of medical staff, yet countless medical personnel and humanitarian workers are still being killed in Syria. I would like to take this opportunity to express our sorrow and gratitude to them and to pay our respect to the brave men and women who continue to work for those in need, under the most severe of circumstances.

The Council and the International Syria Support Group Humanitarian Taskforce have been making strenuous efforts to achieve rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria, as mandated by resolution 2254 (2015). Our attention has been extensive, but any progress is often hard-won. Over the past year, we have worked to identify concrete measures, obstacles and areas to be reached. Yet we have constantly encountered bureaucratic impediments and unreasonably delayed clearances from the Syrian Government. Every inter-agency convoy's departure

or potential cancellation is a subject of worry, and every item is potentially at risk of being removed from convoys. Furthermore, it is clear that facilitation letters issued by the Syrian Government are crucial. It is tragic and unbelievable that one bureaucratic document can be so critical for access to thousands of people. The humanitarian co-penholders — Egypt, Sweden and Japan — have discussed this matter directly with the Permanent Mission of Syria in New York. We urged Syria to make more efforts to issue letters immediately, in line with the United Nations call for them to be issued within two to three days. We believe that the Syrian Mission conveyed our joint message to Damascus. The co-penholders will try to achieve as much as possible in this area.

One of our most urgent concerns at present is eastern Ghouta. Mr. O'Brien explained that the United Nations is requesting a cessation of hostilities to allow humanitarian access. Japan supports that call. But the need for a ceasefire is not limited to eastern Ghouta. We are also concerned about the many reports of fighting in various locations. The next Astana process meeting, to be held at the beginning of May, will be crucial to preserving the ceasefire mechanism, which allows for humanitarian access.

While the details and logistics I have mentioned are vitally important for Syria, we should also keep two broader goals in mind.

The first is the importance of the political process. Although the recent Geneva talks did not yield a breakthrough, there was also no breakdown. That is an implicit affirmation of the fact that there is no military solution to the conflict. We must act on that progress to gain commitments that translate into lifesaving changes on the ground.

The second broad point is the need for truth and accountability. We have seen so much destruction and so many crimes during this six-year war, in particular the use of chemical weapons. Justice may not come immediately, but the United Nations and other humanitarian actors must use their various tools, including those granted by the Security Council, to ascertain facts on the ground. Those facts will form the basis for accountability and for addressing the suffering of the Syrian people.

With those two broader goals in mind, we must continue our efforts unabated to achieve good-faith cooperation and humanitarian access from the Syrian Government in order to serve those most in need.

Mr. Skau (Sweden): I thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his comprehensive briefing today. Every month he returns to the Security Council to report on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Every month the situation becomes more acute. The number of people driven from their homes increases. The number not knowing where their next meal will come from grows. And the number of people maimed or killed grows.

We have heard from Mr. O'Brien again today about the worsening plight of the Syrian people: over 6 million people brutalized, displaced and trapped in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance, and 5 million people wrenched from their homes and their loved ones to seek refuge in the region and beyond — if they survive the journey. Now they are waiting — in besieged towns and villages and in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey — waiting for the assistance they need, waiting for the war to end and waiting for the moment when they can begin to rebuild their lives.

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that their wait will end soon. As we have heard today, rather than decreasing, there is increased militarization and violence on the ground, leading to large numbers of civilian casualties and more internal displacement. It seems that humanitarian considerations are wholly subordinate to military objectives. There continues to be a complete disregard for the laws of war and obligations to protect civilians. Cynical military tactics that blatantly violate international humanitarian law by deliberately targeting civilians are being used to gain military advantage, in particular by Government forces. The upcoming Astana meeting on 3 May offers an opportunity for the ceasefire guarantors to make progress on de-escalation. We expect that they will take that opportunity to deliver. A failure to do so also threatens progress in the upcoming United Nations-led talks in Geneva.

While emphasizing that the Syrian regime and its allies bear the responsibility for the overwhelming majority of violations of international humanitarian law in Syria, we also note that recent airstrikes on Raqqa allegedly led to civilian causalities and struck civilian infrastructure. That compounds the suffering of the people in Raqqa, who are already the victims of senseless torture and murder at the hands of Da'esh. We

urge the international coalition against Da'esh to take greater care in order to protect civilians in Syria.

The reality for many of those who have been forced to live under siege for years is that, when the opportunity does arise to leave, they are cruelly moved to areas scarcely more safe or stable than those they left. The United Nations has repeatedly expressed concern about local agreements preceded by besiegement, starvation and bombardment, and resulting in the forced displacement of civilians. That tactic of bombing and laying siege so as to enable so-called local agreements must stop. We recall the warning from the Secretary-General that, under international humanitarian law, forced displacement may constitute a war crime. We reiterate his call that any evacuation of civilians must be safe, voluntary and to a place of their choosing. We urge parties to ensure the full compliance of any new local agreements with international humanitarian law. We encourage the United Nations, other relevant organizations, and Member States with influence to intensify dialogue with parties and actors, primarily the Government of Syria and Russia.

We understand the predicament that local agreements present for the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies. They are not informed of the terms, have no access, and the security situation limits the possibility to be present during subsequent relocations. However, we must make every effort to avoid another catastrophe like the one in Al-Rashidin. Until the fighting stops, we must continue to explore options for increasing civilian safety by using cameras or other tools as a form of protective vigilance, for example.

The deplorable situation for those relocated to Idlib is of grave concern. Regime air strikes on hospitals and schools in Idlib must stop. Civilians must be protected and humanitarian access must be granted. We call on those with influence over armed groups in Idlib, including Turkey, to use their influence to counter restrictions on the ability of humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations to do their work. Until the situation improves, we might all want to advocate alternative destinations for civilians, ones with better protection and access. We encourage the United Nations to inform the Council in its next report about the situation in Jarabulus, which is another main destination area.

We want to take this opportunity to express our strong support and admiration for the tireless efforts of the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations to deliver assistance to populations in need in an extremely challenging context. They continue to encounter unacceptable obstructions and barriers to the access they need on a daily basis.

We renew our call on the Syrian regime to grant safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to all those in need of assistance, including in locations subject to local agreements. Access is a question of political will. In many cases, a binary choice exists between agreeing to provide lifesaving aid to women and men, boys and girls, or not to do so. We fully support Japan's call, on behalf of the penholders, on the Syrian authorities to implement the simplified approval process of the United Nations.

Let me underline our deep concern about the deteriorating situation in eastern Ghouta, which we also raised with the Syrian Permanent Mission earlier this week. We invite Council members to join us in calling for a pause in the fighting so as to allow humanitarian agencies to reach all in need through the routes they prefer to use, as has been requested by the United Nations since October. In addition to the well-known access constraints, particularly to areas besieged by the Government of Syria, we are also increasingly worried about new access restrictions such as those now being imposed in Idlib and by local authorities in Kurdish-controlled areas.

Every additional day that the people of Syria wait for assistance and an end to the conflict is an indication of the failure of the international community and of the Council to show the courage to take the tough decisions necessary to put humanitarian needs above political considerations; of our failure to live up to our responsibility to protect the people of Syria by ensuring a ceasefire and respect for international humanitarian law; of our failure to deliver a peaceful end to the suffering for the people of Syria. How much longer must they wait? For many, including thousands of children, their dreams for the future are already shattered; the least we can do is give them the support they need to end the nightmare they are living today.

Mr. Aboulatta (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Security Council is holding monthly meetings on the situation in Syria to reaffirm members' positions vis-à-vis the unprecedented suffering of the Syrian

people. We reiterate our words of condemnation and regret to the media and our peoples. We have grown used to it; the Syrian people has grown used to it; it has become a part of the traditional practice that has started to affect our outlook and our real engagement with an interactive dialogue that seeks a common ground to build upon to support a serious effort towards a settlement.

It is important to give ourselves the opportunity to review what the Security Council has achieved in the past few months so that we can objectively judge the approach it has adopted. Let us recall that these meetings and their outcomes over these months have not contributed to supporting the ceasefire. They have brought no real pressure to bear on the parties to engage in direct and serious political negotiations. They did not even prevent the two horrific incidents that took place this month — the first in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April and the second, a terrorist explosion in the Al-Rashidin neighbourhood on 15 April — claiming the lives of more innocent men, women and children, in addition to the hundreds of thousands who have lost their lives during the past six years.

Reviewing the Security Council's approach to the situation in Syria and its impact on the reality on the ground has become an urgent matter. We have warned, time and again that the Council cannot become a media outlet. The impact of its statements must go beyond making newspaper headlines. It is evident that with the heightened level of discord, the work of the Council is moving steadily towards that fate. If in a crisis of this magnitude, we cannot find a modicum of common ground to confront it, what must happen before we make the necessary effort to overcome the current state of polarization and opposing narrow interests?

I would like to thank Mr. O'Brien for his focused and clear briefing today. We reiterate our support for the humanitarian efforts of the United Nations. We are ready to support any effort to alleviate the suffering of civilians in any Syrian town, be it by facilitating access to humanitarian assistance or the evacuation of the sick and injured. We urge the parties concerned to facilitate the mission of the Organization and to work to remove any impediment.

I would like to express our deep regret that the briefing, as expected, reflected the continued human suffering in Syria. It was no different than previous briefings, except in some details, locations and numbers. The practices have not changed; the impediments remain. The factors that continue to fuel the crisis have not changed and will not change if international, regional and internal parties continue to seek any excuse to prevaricate or if the Security Council continues to reflect points of divergence rather than commonalities or to focus on details without looking at the full picture. I therefore call on all parties to support the efforts of the Secretary-General through the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. De Mistura, to reach an agreement on starting a transitional period that meets the aspirations of the Syrian people by establishing democracy and freedoms in a unified sovereign country, in accordance with the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015).

I also reiterate our call on all parties to engage in a serious manner to counter terrorism and the spread of terrorist groups in Syria and to confront the phenomenon of armed groups and militia that are not governed by any reason or law and that continue to receive covert support in the form of weapons and funds without their sponsors being held accountable for those practices. The funding and sponsoring of terrorism in an organized and systematic way in Syria and other countries in the region are not a figment of our imagination; they are a fact. They pose a threat to countries in the region and are being watched by the countries of the region and throughout the wider world. Those countries will continue to endure that threat if some continue to bury their heads in the sand.

There is still some common ground among the members of the Security Council that can be built upon if there is a serious will to do so. We are committed to a frank dialogue on the Syrian crisis that is free of polarization. We remain mindful of the centrality and importance of cooperation between the co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group — the United States and the Russian Federation — as it pertains to Syria at the political level and on the ground. We also believe that Council documents, the statements of the Support Group and any previous consensus reached could be a foundation that we can build upon to assist in revitalizing the work of the International Syria Support Group. We are fully prepared to support any efforts in that regard.

The challenges of the crisis and its repercussions on the region and the world loom large, and no country can address them alone. The saboteurs of the political process in Syria — Special Envoy Mr. De Mistura has

mentioned them time and again — will seek to exploit the divisions in the Council and among international parties, continue to fuel the situation on the ground, defeat any attempt at a political settlement and ensure that the proxy war continues.

Mr. Rycroft (United Kingdom): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his important briefing today and for all of his sterling work.

I would like to begin as Mr. O'Brien did by wholeheartedly condemning the terrorist attack on desperate civilians as they were being evacuated as part of the four towns agreement. It is utterly tragic that over 120 people, including a very high number of children, were brutally killed. The United Kingdom condemns that terrible attack. We will work to ensure that whoever is responsible is held to account.

I also wish to salute the unity and bravery of the humanitarian response, including the response of the White Helmets. Despite a ceasefire being in place since the end of 2016, we continue to witness terrible ongoing violence. In April alone, we know that the regime or its allies have carried out aerial attacks on at least six hospitals and three schools in Syria — I repeat, six hospitals and three schools. That is utterly deplorable. I hope that others will join me in condemning all such incidents. All of us need to do everything in our power to bring the suffering to an end. I therefore ask my Russian colleague: What is Russia doing with its leverage to ensure that the regime stops attacking schools and hospitals?

Once again, such attacks bring into laser focus the urgent and desperate humanitarian needs of 13 million people in Syria. I am especially concerned about the difficulty in reaching the 1.5 million people who live under siege-like conditions and the further 3.2 million in other hard-to-reach areas in Syria. All of them urgently require food, water and medicine. Roughly 5 million Syrians live in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, but the only regime-besieged area to be reached in 2017 was Khan al-Shih where 6,000 people were reached with aid. The other besieged areas reached are Deir ez-Zor, besieged by Da'esh, where the United Nations carries out air drops and the four towns besieged by the Iranian-backed Hizbullah and armed opposition groups. That is a tiny proportion of aid reaching those people who are in most need of it.

Let me be clear — the Syrian regime is using starve-or-surrender tactics. That is abhorrent and a clear breach of international humanitarian law. I am especially concerned about the 420,000 innocent civilians in the besieged part of eastern Ghouta, where supplies are rapidly running out. There are urgent medical needs, shortages of basic food items and no water or power supplies. I finally support Mr. O'Brien's call for a pause in fighting to allow the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to safely enter eastern Ghouta.

At the International Syria Support Group meeting in Geneva on 20 April, Russia committed to pressing the regime to allow the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to access Duma, one part of eastern Ghouta. What is the situation one week later? The regime has not acted. There is still no convoy. We owe it to the people of Duma to do everything we can to improve the situation. The United Nations has received the requisite assurances from the relevant armed opposition groups to allow them to deliver assistance to Duma and it has identified a safe route to enter. The only things now lacking are for the Al-Assad regime to issue a facilitation letter and to pause its aerial bombardment of the area for long enough for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to enter. If Russia is unable to ensure that the regime allows access, we call on the Security Council to act to ensure that the United Nations is able to deliver urgent supplies to Duma, in the first instance.

I will reiterate now what I have said many times before. There can be no sustainable peace until there is a political transition. The Al-Assad regime bears overwhelming responsibility for the suffering of the Syrian people. I implore the whole of the Security Council to work in unity to end the conflict for the sake of the Syrian people.

Mr. Ciss (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): First and foremost, I would like to thank Mr. Stephen O'Brien for his excellent briefing and tireless efforts. Through him, I would like to pay tribute once again to the medical and humanitarian personnel for the sacrifices they make for the Syrian people, who are sorely tested at this time.

Senegal remains deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the Syrian conflict. My delegation would therefore like to reiterate its firm condemnation of the terrorist attack that occurred on 15 April in Al-Rashidin, in western Aleppo, during the evacuation of Fo'ah and Kefraya. That attack, which was denounced by the Security Council, killed 130 people, including 67

children and left hundreds injured. We believe that this is yet another reason for giving as much priority as is required to combating terrorism and violent extremism, in particular the fight against Da'esh and the former Al-Nusra Front, by employing a comprehensive strategy that respects international humanitarian law and relevant Security Council resolutions.

The conflict also highlights the suffering of Syrian children, in particular the fate of 2.4 million who left their homes and another 280,000 who still live in besieged areas. Their plight therefore deserves our concerted attention.

In that regard, we reiterate the call made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child for an investigation of crimes against children, including through active collaboration with existing mechanisms, such as the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission in Syria, the United Nations-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 71/248. My delegation accordingly renews its encouragement to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, in particular its Fact-Finding Mission, in its efforts to shed light on the chemical-weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun so as to bring to justice the perpetrators of that despicable act, which resulted in many child casualties among the victims.

Despite ongoing efforts, the cessation of hostilities facilitated by Russia, Turkey and Iran — which we welcome as part of the Astana process and once again gave us cause for hope and optimism — has been seriously put in question owing to the violence observed throughout the country. Consequently, communities such as Aleppo, Hama, Dar'a, Raqqa and Damascus continue to record many civilian casualties and the continued destruction of public infrastructure, such as schools, health facilities and markets, all of which is in violation of international humanitarian law.

The situation in eastern Ghouta, where approximately 400,000 people are besieged, remains of particular concern. According to the World Health Organization, the three public hospitals and the 17 health centres in the locality are no longer functioning or accessible to the population. Furthermore, the last United Nations humanitarian convoy to reach that region was on 29 October 2016.

Nevertheless, despite extremely difficult conditions, the United Nations and its partners have continued to provide support to those in need among the population. In that regard, my delegation commends the hardly negligible progress made in late March involving the assistance provided to 307,000 persons out of an initial target of 787,500, within the framework of five inter-agency convoys. That represents 39 per cent of the target, as compared to 28 per cent for the previous month of February. Given the Syrian authorities' approval of 71.7 per cent of the United Nations requests for April and May, we hope to see more progress in successfully providing humanitarian assistance. We nevertheless renew our call on those same Syrian authorities to continue issuing the facilitation letters, which are necessary for optimally carrying out the plans conceptualized by the United Nations humanitarian agencies and their partners.

We remind all parties to the Syrian conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law to ensure the population's access to assistance, including medical care, in total security, without any restriction, precondition or hindrance, through the most direct means possible in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

We hope that the technical meetings of the Astana process, held in Tehran and to be held in Astana in early May, will contribute to strengthening and consolidating the ceasefire. Even better, it is important that the truce be reflected in a clear improvement in providing humanitarian assistance under the direction of the United Nations. In that vein, we welcome the work of the Task Force on the Ceasefire of the International Syria Support Group, co-chaired by the United States and the Russian Federation, which, despite major constraints on the ground, is pursuing its efforts to ensure providing humanitarian assistance, particularly in besieged areas where access to aid is rendered virtually impossible. All those efforts must be continued and strengthened to cover all the civilians concerned, especially those living in besieged and difficultly accessed areas.

In conclusion, we reiterate our conviction that the only way to end the crisis and its most devastating humanitarian consequences is through a negotiated

political solution based on the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015), under the auspices of the United Nations.

Mr. Bermúdez (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): As we do every month, we thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien not only for his comprehensive briefing but also for his and his team's work, including that of the thousands of humanitarian workers deployed in Syria, working under extremely difficult conditions. We express our gratitude to all of them.

What more can we say at this stage in the Syrian conflict that has not already been said? Frankly, very little can be added. Uruguay's position has been clear and uniform since assuming its mandate as a non-permanent member of the Security Council last year. Our first goal is and must be to work towards a political solution so as to end the crisis and move towards a peaceful transition in Syria negotiated by all Syrians and backed by the international community. To that end, we have every confidence in the good offices of Special Envoy De Mistura to move forward in the next round of negotiations in Geneva among the parties so as to gradually arrive at points of convergence and give shape to a new chapter in Syria.

Let us avoid the duplicity of the stakeholders inside and outside of the region who call for a negotiated political solution while maintaing their support for armed groups whose actions put them in the same category as Da'esh and the former Al-Nusra Front. Along with the Geneva process, the Astana process is crucial to relaunching and strengthening the cessation of hostilities across the entire Syrian territory, which would lead to a significant reduction in violence in that country. We commend the efforts of Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan, among others, and hope that they will be able to continue on that path next week. Let us step up the work of the International Syrian Support Group in Geneva, so that we can help it forge a path leading towards a negotiations, which is the only way out of that tragedy. We recall that the Security Council adopted resolution 2336 (2016) calling for such a cessation four months ago. We support that resolution and demand that it be implemented.

Of course, the political process and the cessation of hostilities are only two of the stages that will ensure turning a new page in Syria. The third concerns the humanitarian dimension. We take note of the improvement in humanitarian access in February and March in hard-to-access, besieged areas. However, compared to a year ago, we are far from any encouraging results. Let us continue to call for the immediate, sustained and unfettered access to everyone, without distinction, in order to provide for the needs of millions of people.

For Uruguay, the protection of civilians in Syria and any other area of conflict is an absolute priority. It is immoral to make distinctions among civilians. Unfortunately, over the past seven years, we have seen the most serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict. Until there is accountability for those crimes, those responsible will continue to enjoy impunity and commit them. In that regard, we welcome the report presented last Friday by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic during the Arria Formula meeting. We would like to see further exchanges between the Commission and the Security Council, which would be extremely useful to the work of both.

Mid-April was particularly difficult for Syrian civilians. To the continued and indiscriminate bombings and attacks using all types of prohibited weapons was added, on 4 April, the brutal chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun, which all of us here condemned unanimously. We are all aware of why we were unable to adopt a draft resolution. This is a war crime that needs to be comprehensively investigated so as to identify the perpetrators. We are confident in the work of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and hope that it will soon be able to present illuminating conclusions. We condemn the term "staged", which was used to qualify this cowardly and disproportionate attack. That incident triggered the unilateral use of force by some Member States. We reiterate that this is the least appropriate way of dealing with this kind of situation because it only increases the tensions and undermines the reaching of a solution to the conflict at the multilateral level.

The other incident that marked this month was the brutal attack against civilians being evacuated from Fo'ah and Kefraya in the framework of the agreement of the four towns, which also includes Madaya and Zabadani. Although we share the concerns about forced displacement of the population, which could constitute a war crime, we must also take into account that there are scores of thousands that are still in difficult conditions in besieged areas, and they are the victims

of constant bombings and attacks. In many cases they are dying of hunger. Any evacuation must ensure the safety of civilians, ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance and make efforts to ensure that they can eventually return to their homes as soon as possible.

A year since the adoption of resolution 2286 (2016), we continue to witness the destruction of hospitals and other medical facilities in Syria. It is an outrage that the parties have ignored their commitments, thereby depriving thousands of people of their right to medical assistance and causing hundreds of victims among medical personnel. We see this practice repeated in schools, markets and other places of civilian infrastructure. We condemn such attacks in Syria, Yemen and wherever else they occur. They are also war crimes, and those responsible must be held accountable.

In conclusion, we would like to make several requests. First, we must consolidate the cessation of hostilities across the entire Syrian territory. Secondly, we must call on all disputing parties to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities. Thirdly, we request that the Syrian authorities eliminate or minimize bureaucratic restrictions to ensure that supplies and humanitarian assistance can reach hard-to-reach and besieged areas. Fourthly, there is already a ceasefire in force, adopted through resolution 2336 (2016). We add our voice to the call made by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to establish a humanitarian pause of 48 hours in eastern Ghouta. That should be the practice in all areas under siege.

Mr. Cardi (Italy): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing. He and the humanitarian agencies have the full support of Italy.

As we know, the Syrian conflict has already caused unspeakable levels of human suffering, death and displacement. International humanitarian law is violated. Terrorists continue to kill scores of Syrians, including children — like in the barbaric attack in Al-Rashidin on 15 April. The carnage, which reached new heights of horror with the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun, offends our common humanity and can undermine any path towards a credible end to the Syrian conflict.

We take note of the increase in the number of inter-agency convoys that have reached their destinations in hard-to-reach areas since last month. That demonstrates that humanitarian access can be provided in Syria. But it is not enough. It is important to focus on besieged areas, where the situation clearly is worsening, especially in eastern Ghouta, where the 400,000 people under siege have no medical facilities to rely upon since all has been destroyed. Convoys are ready to deliver much-needed assistance to Douma and elsewhere, but cannot proceed. The armed faction has provided written guarantee for the convoys, whereas the regime — despite Russian pressure — continues to deny this authorization. We support the call, therefore, for an immediate pause in the fighting to allow for humanitarian aid to be delivered to eastern Ghouta, which cannot become the next Aleppo. The Security Council should closely monitor this issue and step up the pressure on the relevant parties.

Local agreements between the parties to the conflict, often reached after months of siege and bombings — such as the agreement of the four towns — are also cause for concern. They respond to the military logic of the conflict rather than ensure the protection of civilians. The evacuations that follow such agreements, in which the United Nations is neither involved nor an observer, have to respect humanitarian principles. We encourage the United Nations to monitor the evacuation in the four towns and Al-Waer in order to ensure the protection of civilians and prevent further violations of humanitarian law.

The consequences of the conflict have spread across the region. Instability radiates far beyond Syria, be it in the form of terrorism or in the form of uncontrolled flows of refugees. Legal and safe ways to ensure the movement of people fleeing from conflicts are paramount. We commend neighbouring countries that provide refuge to the millions of people who have fled the fighting. In that regard, the Italian Government is carrying out a programme called Humanitarian Corridors, which allows safe and legal entry to Italy for people fleeing the horrors of the combat. It is an act of solidarity and a means to combat trafficking, a model that other countries are following.

I also wish to highlight the contribution of the recent Brussels conference. Italy confirmed its commitment of humanitarian aid and longer-term assistance for 2017-2018; but of course humanitarian assistance must be delivered to the population. The conference also resulted in renewed efforts by the international community, both in the response to the humanitarian tragedy and also in the direction of a political solution because. As we know, the humanitarian and political

dimensions are deeply interconnected. Improving the humanitarian situation is key to creating a constructive environment in Geneva, where talks will resume under the leadership of Staffan de Mistura. We cannot allow that critical negotiation to be jeopardized by an intensification of fighting on the ground or by continued lack of humanitarian access to the population. The co-guarantors of the ceasefire and the Special Envoy have a responsibility in that respect, and we look forward to the next Astana meeting.

What emerged also in the Group of Seven ministerial meetings in Italy recently, which also included key regional stakeholders, is that only a political settlement to implement resolution 2254 (2015) will bring this conflict and the dire humanitarian situation to an end.

In conclusion, I wish to reaffirm the importance of accountability for those responsible for the terrible crimes we are witnessing in Syria. Italy will continue to work with Council members to that end.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I wish to sincerely thank Mr. Stephen O'Brien for his briefing and his commitment. He has once again reminded us of our responsibilities with regard to the Syrian tragedy.

Since our last humanitarian consultations, one more step has been taken into the horror. The chemical-weapons attack at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April killed more than 80 people and injured more than 500. We expect the Secretary-General's next report to address very precisely the humanitarian consequences of this tragedy.

Information that France has obtained, which the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jean-Marc Ayrault, made public yesterday, provides evidence of the use of sarin gas and the responsibility of the regime, which will have to answer for these crimes. Syria undertook in 2013 to never again use chemical weapons and to destroy all of its chemical-weapons capabilities. More than ever now, we must remind the regime of its obligations. More broadly, the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons must remain an absolute and universal obligation, as it is one of the pillars of our collective security.

Ten days after 4 April, a convoy of civilians was attacked by a vehicle bomb in the Al-Rashidin transit zone, killing at least 130 people, including 67 children. Once again the Syrian population has been directly targeted. The price it is paying is unbearable. This tragedy took place in a very particular context, namely, that of the cross-displacement of populations. So far, more than 11,000 people have been evacuated from the so-called four towns of Fo'ah, Kafraya, Zabadani and Madaya. I would like to remind the Security Council that civilian evacuations must be undertaken on a voluntary basis. The Secretary-General has clearly pointed out that the forced displacement of populations may constitute war crimes, and the populations concerned must be allowed to choose their destination.

In that context, we appeal again to those who support the Syrian regime to exert all the pressure needed for it to comply with its international obligations and allow for full, secure, unconditional and unhindered access by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to people in need throughout Syria. The lives of hundreds of thousands of people hang in the balance, but United Nations access to the population is still as hampered as ever, especially for besieged cities. We recall that the use of hunger as a weapon of war and obstacles to relief are war crimes, and we reiterate with force our call for the immediate lifting of all sieges.

The gap between the aid reaching the zones controlled by the regime and the aid granted to areas held by the opposition can only grow. Throughout March, United Nations agencies submitted new requests for access, but the Government's refusals deprived more than 68,000 people of food assistance in Homs, Dar'a and rural Damascus. We are particularly concerned about the humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta. Humanitarian convoys were planned by the United Nations in this area. However, the facilitation letters for the loading of the convoy have not yet been issued by the regime, whereas the opposition has given sufficient guarantees in terms of security for the letting the convoys through. We therefore call on the parties to take all necessary measures to enable aid workers to proceed without delay and in complete safety with the delivery of aid.

Moreover, the Syrian authorities persist in refusing to authorize medicines and medical supplies in humanitarian convoys. This is unacceptable. The World Health Organization's requests for access to five areas of the country have remained unanswered. This is simply not acceptable. France recalls the right of the Syrian population to humanitarian assistance and protection, in accordance with international humanitarian law and Security Council resolutions. The attacks on the hospitals and schools, in particular,

to which Stephen O'Brien has referred, also calls for our strongest condemnation.

The situation we are describing no longer has anything to do with a cessation of hostilities. The regime has consistently violated its commitments methodically — systematically — while claiming to carry out actions against Da'esh. Violence intensifies, especially in the provinces of Hama, Damascus and Dar'a. The air strikes of the regime against civilians continue east of Qalamoun. Indiscriminate attacks against civilians are taking place incessantly. The guarantors of the truce concluded on 29 December took responsibility for overseeing its implementation. We therefore appeal to the States guarantors of the Astana process, and in particular to Russia and Iran, to impose on the Syrian regime a complete cessation of hostilities.

In that context, the establishment of an efficient international mechanism for monitoring the ceasefire is a necessity that France has regularly called for and for which it has made concrete proposals. The improvement of the situation on the ground is essential for the resumption of the negotiations in Geneva during the month of May with a view to a political transition, and this, of course, under the auspices of the United Nations. That is the only way to save Syria from the abyss of violence, that of Da'esh and that of the regime, which are feeding each other.

We all know that a tangible and lasting improvement in the situation in Syria is possible only in the context of a political settlement of the crisis based on a political transition in the country, as provided for in resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). To put it bluntly, any credible revival of political negotiations presupposes much stronger pressure from Russia on the Damascus regime, as well as on the continuation of the recent American strikes, which we have approved, and a real political re-engagement of the United States in Syria in parallel with the efforts of Europeans and other stakeholders. Rest assured, Madam President, of the France's determined commitment in this direction.

Mr. Sadykov (Kazakhstan): We express our deep appreciation for Under-Secretary-General O'Brien's update and commend him for his commitment and that of the staff of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to mitigating the grave humanitarian suffering in Syria, which has reached unprecedented proportions. We are concerned about the grave humanitarian catastrophe in the country, which must be addressed on various fronts. We believe that the solution of the military problems requires serious progress on the following issues.

First, we must see further advancement of the political process facilitated by the Geneva and Astana processes. The ceasefire agreement is crucial for humanitarian action to be possible and should be preserved. Secondly, countering terrorist groups needs unified actions that will significantly improve the humanitarian situation. Thirdly, we need to strengthen the commendable efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Red Crescent Society and the relevant United Nation agencies. We pay tribute to the large number of United Nations personnel and humanitarian workers who labour in such hazardous conditions, some of whom have sacrificed a great deal for the noble cause of peace.

Equally important are the efforts of the international community to restore the damaged infrastructure and develop an integrated programme to rebuild the country's economic potential, by providing, inter alia, electricity and water supplies and education for children and by setting up schools and hospitals in areas liberated from terrorists. These measures must commence now and not wait until after reaching an agreement. Undoubtedly the recovery process should serve as a powerful impetus for the return of refugees and reduce the social base of the armed and terrorist groups.

We welcome the humanitarian response plan for Syria for 2017, with its budget of $3.4 billion for comprehensive humanitarian assistance. We thank the donors for their continued support and urge them to honour their commitments and pledges so that the United Nations can maintain operations on such a large scale throughout the country.

We are concerned about the continuing indiscriminate attacks that result in innocent civilians' death or long-term injury and impairment. The parties to the conflict should comply forthwith with their obligations under the relevant international law and take all the appropriate steps to protect those civilians who have ceased to take part in the hostilities, including members of ethnic and religious communities.

Political tensions that produce such a level of human suffering can have no military solution. Kazakhstan therefore calls on the members of the Security Council and the parties to the conflict and those who

have influence on them to work to achieve a political settlement of the conflict in Syria so as not to further escalate those tensions and undo the progress that has been made in Geneva and Astana.

Mr. Zhang Dianbin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien for his briefing.

The conflict in Syria has resulted in massive civilian casualties, and China sympathizes deeply with the suffering of the Syrian people. We strongly urge all the parties in Syria to reach a settlement through dialogue and consultation. Recently, while the intra-Syrian ceasefire has been holding, thanks to the concerted efforts of the international community, in some regions it allows for no optimism. China welcomes the important role that the Astana dialogue is playing in maintaining the ceasefire and hopes that the new round of talks will help to consolidate the current momentum.

We commend the efforts of United Nations aid agencies to continue to scale up their assistance and send out more convoys to various parts of Syria. We urge all the parties in Syria to work diligently to implement the ceasefire agreement and take appropriate measures to actively coordinate with the United Nations humanitarian assistance efforts while providing speedy, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access so as to create the necessary conditions for United Nations action and for reaching a political settlement of the issue.

China welcomed the recently held Brussels conference on Syria and looks forward to seeing concrete results from it as soon as possible. If the country's humanitarian situation is to be mitigated, the international community must remain committed to a political settlement in Syria. A new round of peace talks will take place in Geneva in mid-May. All the relevant parties must remain firmly committed to their diplomatic efforts and continue to support both the work of Special Envoy de Mistura and the United Nations as a primary mediator. All of the parties in Syria must participate constructively in the talks and on the basis of the principle that the dialogue and negotiations should be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, with the aim of gradually reaching a complete and lasting solution that is acceptable to all parties.

The terrorist attacks on Syrian territory are a serious setback to international assistance efforts. China condemns the recent terror attack in Al-Rashidin that targeted the evacuation of civilians. We urge for the intensification of international coordination in countering terrorism, unifying standards and firmly combating all the terrorist organizations on the Council's list. China has supported efforts to mitigate the humanitarian situation in Syria and arrive at a political settlement of the crisis, and we are prepared to continue playing a constructive role in a full, fair and appropriate settlement without further delay.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien for his briefing today and for his commitment to the work he has undertaken, which we fully support.

The conflict in Syria is entering its seventh year and the humanitarian situation there continues to be very worrying. To date, according to a report from the World Health Organization on 3 April, about 400,000 people have died and 1.5 million have been injured since the conflict began. According to reports from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 3.5 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. We are very concerned about the fact that, despite the ceasefire that has been implemented in accordance with resolution 2336 (2016), attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure by some of the parties involved in the conflict have continued. It is deeply regrettable that more than half of the public hospitals and primary-care centres in Syria have closed or are functioning only partially and have found their capacity reduced even further by indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure. We reiterate firmly that the agreements reached under the ceasefire must be complied with and respected, and that all the parties involved are under an obligation to ensure the safety and integrity of those caught up in the conflict.

We commend the fact that in the inter-agency humanitarian assistance plan for April and May, 71.7 per cent of the places to which admission was requested were approved, and we urge all parties to make every effort to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches all the people provided for in the plan, without obstacles or restrictions and whether or not the areas are easy or difficult to access. We are very disturbed by the fact that the security forces of the parties to the conflict continue to remove first-aid, obstetric and paediatric equipment and other items from the medical supplies in the humanitarian assistance convoys, thereby reducing their capacity and effectiveness and hurting those who are in urgent need. We would like to remind them that

they must allow unconditional access to humanitarian assistance, guarantee and safeguard the convoys' security and integrity and refrain from considering them as military objectives.

We would like to acknowledge the important work that the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has been doing, both as a guarantor of security in the deployment of humanitarian assistance and in evacuating people from areas where armed clashes have occurred. We would also like to acknowledge and commend the work being done to alleviate the humanitarian crisis facing the Syrian people by the staff of the various humanitarian agencies and entities such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Red Crescent, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration, among others.

We deplore the fact that in March more than 450 people, including women and children, died and hundreds more were injured in Da'esh's dastardly attacks, in clashes between the parties to the conflict, and in military operations of the forces on the ground that are fighting Da'esh. We also condemn the criminal and cowardly car-bomb attack of 15 April on the town of Al-Rashidin, which killed more than 120 people, including innocent women and children, who were part of a group of 5,000 civilians being evacuated to Aleppo. The perpetrators of that terrible act should be duly investigated, prosecuted and punished. With regard to the attacks on 4 April in Khan Shaykhun, the Plurinational State of Bolivia firmly condemns the use of chemical weapons or of chemicals as weapons, acts that are unjustifiable and criminal regardless of their motive or where, when and by whom they are committed. The use of chemical weapons is a violation of our obligations under international law. We demand that the attacks be subject to an independent, impartial, unpoliticized, full and conclusive investigation and that those responsible be duly prosecuted and severely punished.

In that regard, we reiterate our firm condemnation of all acts of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable. It is our unequivocal belief that any counter-terrorism action should be carried out in coordination with the Government so as to prevent the death of innocent civilians, in full respect for all the provisions of resolutions 2254 (2015) and 2336 (2016). In that context, we recognize the tremendous effort being made by the Government and the Syrian people in their struggle against Da'esh, which is a war they are waging on behalf of all of us.

Finally, we reiterate that the Plurinational State of Bolivia firmly and clearly believes that the only option for resolving this conflict is through a political process that is inclusive, orderly and led by the Syrian people, and we reaffirm our support for the progress made at the Astana and Geneva meetings, which will continue in May. We have high expectations that these forums for dialogue will help us achieve definitive and lasting peace.

Ms. Guadey (Ethiopia): Let me thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien for his briefing and continued leadership in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria and other places, including in our region. We would like to express our gratitude to the United Nations and its partners for the courageous humanitarian services they provide to millions of Syrians under extremely challenging circumstances.

We remain seriously concerned about the humanitarian conditions in Syria. The continued fighting in multiple areas around the country and the increased militarization on the ground, as the report of the Secretary-General (S/2017/339) demonstrates, is deeply troubling. The continued fighting has resulted in civilian death, injuries and displacement, as well as the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools and medical facilities. We also condemned all terrorist attacks, including the heinous terrorist attack in Al-Rashidin on 15 April, which took the lives of more than 126 people many of them children and injured dozens. Unfortunately, it is civilians who continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict. Hence the protection of civilians remains of paramount importance.

Despite the continued humanitarian deliveries in the first two months of the inter-agency plan, reaching out to those in need for urgent humanitarian assistance remains a critical challenge owing to insecurity and administrative impediments. In that regard, ensuring safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access is indispensable to providing the much-needed humanitarian relief to all Syrians throughout the country. In that connection, we encourage the United Nations to continue its engagement with the Syrian Government to facilitate and improve the approval process.

More than 13 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance every day. Without achieving a Syrian-led political settlement, the tragedy of the Syrian people

will continue with adverse human, political, economic and social consequences. As we have been consistently saying, and we reiterate, that the only lasting solution to put an end to the daily miseries of Syrians is a comprehensive political dialogue based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) under the auspices of the United Nations.

While it is the Syrians themselves who have the responsibility to ensure sustainable and inclusive peace, the international community, particularly the Security Council, has an essential role to support them in achieving a political solution in stabilizing and reconstructing Syria. In that regard, the Brussels conference, which pledged financial support for the humanitarian work in Syria, is an important initiative, which contributes to addressing the conflict and its regional impact.

We also believe that strengthening the ceasefire guaranteed by Russia, Turkey and Iran, and ensuring its full compliance, is important for the creation of a supporting environment for the next round of intra-Syrian political negotiations, which should take place as quickly as possible with constructive and serious engagements of all parties.

In conclusion, it is an undeniable fact that the armed conflict has caused a long-term humanitarian crisis that will continue to have a damaging impact on Syrians for years to come. The continued worrying situation on the ground and the scale of the suffering of the Syrians makes the search for a political solution more urgent than ever.

Mr. Yelchenko (Ukraine): I wish to thank the United States presidency for organizing today's meeting. Let me also join my colleagues and thank Stephen O'Brien for his briefing and his devoted position.

Syria continues to suffer from a terrible six-year-long war which has left unhealing scars on the Syrian people and has presented an immense challenge to the entire world. It is clear from the Secretary-General's report (S/2017/339) and Stephen O'Brien's briefing that negative trends in the humanitarian domain are increasing. Though March was a somewhat better month in terms of United Nations humanitarian access, we need to bear in mind that progress is limited mostly to the hard-to-reach areas, while the besieged ones, where more than 600,000 people live, need assistance the most.

The Council has stated time and again that the sieges must be lifted and that access must be granted and maintained in a sustainable manner. Yet, here we are with practically no progress to report. The reason is simple enough. Continuing the sieges is a deliberate tactic of the Al-Assad regime and his allies that supplements and feeds his military strategy. The essence of this tactic is starve or surrender. When people surrender, they put them on the bus and send them to Idlib, where they continue to bomb them again and again.

We are dismayed by recent reports of Syrian or Russian air strikes on a hospital in a rebel-held Idlib province two days ago that killed more than a dozen people, including patients. The recent terrorist attack against evacuees who were being carried by buses from the besieged towns in Syria, which led to the death of more than 100 people, including children, is another terrible crime and a demonstration of shameless disregard for human life, which we have seen so many times throughout the conflict. We strongly condemn the continuing violence against the civilian population in Syria, which has suffered immensely during this brutal war.

The situation in eastern Ghouta, where approximately 400,000 people are besieged in a number of towns and surrounding rural areas, is particularly worrisome. Of the 3 public hospitals and 17 health-care centres in eastern Ghouta, not one is functioning. Hitting medical facilities and schools is also part of the aforementioned deliberate tactics of the Al-Assad regime and his allies. In March alone, the United Nations received credible reports of 19 attacks against medical facilities. Such a reckless and deliberate strategy carries fundamental risks for the long-term stability not only of Syria and the Levant, but also of the entire Middle East and North Africa region. The six-year war keeps 1.75 million children out of school, with 7,000 schools completely destroyed and 85 per cent of Syrians living in poverty. As long as there is no progress on this and other humanitarian issues, we can rest assured that the Al-Assad regime is in no mood to seriously engage in political talks.

Against that backdrop, there is still an active and aggressive recruitment campaign being carried out in Syria by Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Leaving Syrians without hope any longer will create a long-term terrorist safe heaven in the very heart of the region. The stakes are really high. There is

no more time for lip service or subversive strategies. Serious and responsible political engagement in Geneva and immediate humanitarian relief efforts are long past due. The Council should finally react to the numerous desperate calls of Stephen O'Brien and his colleagues.

Mr. Iliichev (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

In general, in Syria, the cessation of hostilities that began on 30 December 2016 is holding. At the same time, there have been incidents in which it has been undermined and there have been actions carried out by terrororists and armed groups. Their offensive actions, including those taken in Damascus, which undermined the most recent round of inter-Syrian talks in Geneva, are fresh in our memory. These types of escalations have an adverse impact on the humanitarian situation.

The ongoing criticism of the Syrian Government and the emotional calls to the country's guarantors, including Russia, do not help matters.

We are carrying out our obligations in good faith. There are other influential players who are unfortunately in no in hurry to meet us halfway. In that regard, the only approach that can have a positive impact is a collective one. And we should not forget the ongoing importance of the task of separating the constructively disposed opposition from the terrorists. The first steps in that direction succeeded only thanks to the joint efforts of the countries that are the guarantors of the Astana process, but much remains to be done.

In many cases, the cessation of hostilities regime has enabled the various humanitarian convoys agreed on with the Syrian Government to proceed successfully, and the progress made in the past few months is evident. Painstaking efforts to establish the parameters for humanitarian access and a medical evacuation in eastern Ghouta are ongoing. Given the delicate nature and operational constraints of that effort, we should not count on getting instant results. Brash public-relations campaigns will not help. To start with, it is not as simple as some would like to imagine, and the problem is not just about facilitation letters, but also because one key reason for the difficulties is the provocative actions of the fighters.

Furthermore, we do not fully share the concerns about the situation in this area. Rural Damascus is an ancient farming region that provides the capital with food. It is no accident that the report of the Secretary-General (S/2017/339) notes that the supply of agricultural products from eastern Ghouta to Damascus has been halted as a result of the worsening situation. We understand that sending humanitarian convoys in a time of conflict is always fraught with risk, and not everything goes according to plan. Our military specialists often accompany caravans, which is why, unlike the humanitarian theoreticians, we know first-hand the cost of those operations. In order to draw up optimal parameters for them, we still need the platform of the humanitarian task force of the International Syria Support Group.

In spite of all this, however, the reconciliation process is under way in a number of Syrian neighbourhoods. Thanks to the activities of the Russian Centre in Hmeimim, at least 1,500 towns have joined the process. Such agreements also take the form of local truces, in which appropriate agreements are signed by representatives of the authorities and militia leaders. For instance, we are close to concluding a local truce in the problematic area of Al-Waer in the city of Homs. While members of the illegal armed groups and their families are leaving for areas of Syria that have not gone along with the cessation of hostilities regime, many of the rebels have decided to return to a peaceful life by accepting the Government's amnesty. we hope that the problem of the four towns can be addressed when the regional power centres reach a firm agreement.

The treacherous terrorist attack in Al-Rashidin on residents evacuated from Fo'ah and Kefraya rightly aroused outrage across the globe. In that connection, we do not agree with the criticism of the practice of concluding local truces. It may not be ideal, but it is a practical instrument for bringing normalcy to the situation and saving lives on a temporary basis, as experience has shown in eastern Aleppo and other urban areas. Now Syrians need help in restoring decent living conditions in liberated areas so they can return to their homes.

We were surprised by the statements of our United Kingdom and French colleagues regarding local truces, which are the result of agreements between the Government and relevant opposition groups. They represent another option for avoiding the greater numbers of casualties that would occur without such agreements. In that regard, double standards are still at work. When Muslim populations in the Central African Republic were moved from the capital and western areas to the north-east, with the participation

of the United Nations and the French operation, it was justified as an attempt to save human lives. We all know what happened. The Muslim population in the capital of Bangui was reduced by 99 per cent and the consequences of the move are still being felt today. The destabilization we are now seeing now in the centre of the country is being provoked specifically from the north-East, where the Muslims were moved. Let us refrain from distinguishing between the dignity of the lives of Syrians and of people in other countries where we have to act from the best motives to try to save lives.

We are seriously concerned about the situation in the north of Syria, where several military operations are breaking out simultaneously. The majority of the participants, including the so-called coalition, were not invited in by the Syrian Government. This is a clear violation of the sovereignty of the country and encroaches on its territorial integrity. Peaceful civilians are being killed in the bombing and vital infrastructure is being destroyed. The strikes on the Kurdish militias who have been fighting the terrorists this entire time are in total contradiction to the international community's professed determined resistance to this evil.

We must never allow ourselves to ignore the fact that we have no idea of what is going on in the areas that are still controlled by terrorists or how hundreds of thousands of people are living. Neither the United Nations nor most of its partners have access to these areas. We are not talking just about Deir ez-Zor, where at least humanitarian assistance is being provided via air drops. We have to point out here that the humanitarian reports on Syria sometimes retouch facts that support criticism of the fighters of armed groups. Unverified information circulates. The Syrian Government trusts external participants very little, for obvious reasons, since against the backdrop of an anti-Damascus campaign all they see is provocation. Why would we want to aggravate that feeling rather than restore the prospects for cooperation with Damascus?

It is disappointing that there is once again a lack of data about the stocks of medicines used to support terrorist fighters that were discovered in eastern Aleppo after it was liberated. We demanded that the circumstances be investigated and brought to light and for more than a month now have been waiting for results that were supposed to be officially reported to the Security Council. Incidentally, similar stocks of medicines were discovered in Zabadani and Madaya after they were liberated.

We call attention once again to the urgent issue of demining Syria, including its cultural heritage sites. While the Russian and Syrian specialists have worked well together and have demined thousands of hectares of residential areas in Aleppo and done major sapper work in Palmyra, we need a united effort in this area. In that regard, we call for establishing an international demining coalition for Syria from among the interested countries and hope to includ\\ the relevant United Nations agencies in that. We also believe that it would be appropriate to create a fund to finance commercial companies that could participate in the demining.

The United Nations humanitarian bodies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syria Red Crescent have been working furiously for the past two weeks to restore normal life to the people. We should not forget that despite unfair externally imposed sanctions, the Syrian Government has also been making massive efforts — a fact about which the reports are usually silent. Help is also being provided by international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, we should emphasize that we take a critical view of certain NGOs that are obeying the orders of their foreign sponsors and violating Syria's sovereignty by working exclusively in areas that are not controlled by the Government. The White Helmets, who have been heaped with praise in Western capitals, are a prime example, frequently displaying a lack of conscience in publishing false information and staging film footage designed to blacken the Syrian Government and army's reputation. There are multiple examples of evidence of their direct ties to terrorists and extremists.

Russia is providing Syrians with humanitarian assistance on an almost daily basis, in some cases with the participation of our foreign partners. Medical assistance is being provided, and more than 12,000 Syrians have received care from qualified personnel.

We underscore our unstinting support for a peaceful solution in Syria, guided by the idea that the country's fate should be decided by Syrians themselves. Furthermore, Russia in in the front lines of those efforts. We do not see any reason to diverge from agreed-upon parameters for the political process guided by the United Nations. Syrian sides have already taken on board the United Nations-formulated proposal on the basis of the four baskets, including building a constitution and counter-terrorism activities. The processes in Astana and Geneva are vital working forums that complement

one another. Progress on all negotiating tracks is the best way to improve the humanitarian situation.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the United States.

It has been just three weeks since the world was horrified by pictures of poisoned children in Syria, the result of deadly nerve agents dropped from the sky. Those images of suffering and dying children will never be forgotten. But there is a quieter, slower kind of death occurring in Syria today. It is even more deliberate, more labour-intensive and more widespread then dropping chemical weapons from thousands of feet in the air. The Syrian regime is engaged in a purposeful strategy of siege and surrender. Civilians stranded inside are literally kept as prisoners until they die or kneel before the Government. They are denied food. They are also denied lifesaving medical supplies. That campaign of holding humanitarian relief hostage to Al-Assad's political goals is not new, but it is worsening. More humanitarian assistance is being denied to besieged areas today than at this time last year. More Syrian men, women and children are suffering and dying because aid is not being allowed through. That is what the Syrian dictator means when he says that "the only option is victory".

Al-Assad will tighten the noose around the necks of his own people until they give in. The Syrian Government's slow strangulation of its people happens so frequently and so similarly that it has almost become textbook. First Government forces or their allies surround a city, town or village. They cut off all commercial routes in and out. Then the United Nations requests access to bring relief to the people as food and medical supplies vanish. The United Nations mission is a humanitarian one: they do not care who the people are or whether they are pro-Government or pro-opposition. They just want to save human lives.

But the Syrian regime does not let them. They hide behind bureaucracy and deny requests for humanitarian access. That is permission the Government could easily give if it actually wanted to do so. The few convoys that manage to get approvals are often held up at checkpoints. They are stopped by Al-Assad's soldiers, or by rogue militias that the Al-Assad regime cannot, or will not, control. The aid they carry does not reach those who need it. And month after month we sit in the Security Council and talk about these very issues, and nothing changes.

Even more bone-chilling is the fact that convoys that do get through are increasingly looted of medical supplies — items that have no military purpose but are essential to saving the lives of civilians who do not bow to the regime. Syrian Government forces and pro-Government militias remove baby formula, vaccines and forceps from midwifery kits. They raid paediatric kits of antibiotics, needles and gauze. They remove dialysis equipment, family hygiene kits and burn kits from trucks. There is no reason I can conceivably think of for that to happen. Maybe my colleagues from Russia and other allies of the Syrian regime can help me out. What possible definition of humanitarian relief does not include antibiotics and dialysis equipment? What possible justification is there for preventing malnourished women and their children from receiving baby formula from the United Nations and its partners?

Of course there is no justification, but there is a reason. With impunity, Syrian regime troops on the ground work to prevent United Nations aid from going to the men, women and children who need it. At the same time, they operate black markets and they sell many of the same products. Medical supplies that desperate people should be getting for free are instead sold at inflated prices or extorted through bribes at checkpoints. This is a major business in Syria, and yet another reason that the sieges have not been lifted.

People are profiting off the suffering and dying of the Syrian people, and none of this is prevented or even opposed by Russia. According to the United Nations latest report, medical items that would have provided 36,000 lifesaving and life-sustaining treatment were removed from humanitarian convoys in March. As we speak, 450,000 people in the Damascus suburbs are being slowly squeezed by the Syrian regime. Those areas have been under siege since 2012, but recently Government forces closed the last routes for even black markets to get into the city. They have blocked all humanitarian aid deliveries since last October.

The people in the Damascus, suburbs just like in other besieged areas of Syria, are slowly dying. Cancer patients are dying from lack of chemotherapy. Kidney patients are dying from lack of dialysis. And children are suffering most of all: nearly one third of all war-related injuries are two children under the age of 15. But because the Syrian military has bombed all the hospitals in the area, they cannot receive professional treatment for their injuries.

Those are the atrocities occurring in Syria every day that do not make the headlines. A resident doctor in one of the only cancer centres serving the besieged areas summed up the condition of her patients tragically well when she said, "death is coming at them from every direction". When death surrounds you, words mean very little. Al-Assad has proven he will act only to increase the suffering of his people, not ease it. And so it falls to others to do what basic human decency requires.

Russia must live up to its promise to deliver real peace talks and a real political solution. The sieges of the Syrian people must be lifted. The war profiteering and the theft of medical supplies must be stopped. Syrians in desperate need of humanitarian assistance must receive it. Bashar Al-Assad clearly believes it is necessary to starve hundreds of thousands of people in order to remain in power.

When I asked the Council, as we talked about everything that is happening here, I heard from each and every member some word of desperation and of defeat because we talk about this so much, and every time we talk about it more people continue to die. I listened to my Russian colleague, and he talked about task forces and diplomacy and less criticism of the Syrian regime. Where has that gotten us? It has not gotten us anywhere. On the times where we could actually do something as a Security Council, who is the one Member State that continues to protect the regime that is keeping humanitarian assistance from going through?

Many members have said that we need to put pressure on the Syrian regime. That is actually not the case. We need to put pressure on Russia, because Russia continues to cover for the Syrian regime. Russia continues to allow them to keep humanitarian aid from the people that need it. Russia continues to cover for a leader who uses chemical weapons against his own people. Russia continues to veto. And Al-Assad continues to do those things because they know that Russia will continue to cover for them.

Sitting in this Chamber, I appreciate all the comments that members have made. But all eyes and all pressure now need to go to Russia, because they are the ones that can stop this if they want to. Do not listen to the distractions of what they are trying to say while pointing to other conflicts. Do not listen to the fact that they claim the reports now are wrong. First it was the Security Council that was wrong; now it is Mr. O'Brien's report that is wrong. But the images do not lie. The humanitarian workers do not lie. The fact that they cannot get the assistance they need — that is not lying. What is is to continue to give Russia a pass for allowing this terrible situation to occur.

I will continue to press the Security Council to act to do something, regardless of whether the Russians continue to veto it, because it is our voice that needs to be heard. The Syrian people do not care about diplomacy. They do not care about any sort of task force. They do not care about any of the things we said today. They are just trying to live their very last day.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

No surprise, the representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Iliichev (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): With regard to your statement, Madam President, allow me to once again call your attention to the fact — stressed by many who took the floor today — that Russia, Turkey and Iran are doing their part to ensure that there is compliance with the cessation of hostilities, which is the best way to bring about an improvement in the humanitarian situation in Syria. Neither you, Madam, or Western colleagues said a single word about what they are doing to improve the situation. How are they bringing pressure to bear on the moderate or non-moderate opposition that they have influence over? Mr. O'Brien, in his briefing, did directly touch upon those areas that are surrounded or controlled by terrorists.

The meeting rose at noon.